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ABSTRACT

This is a report on help-seeking behavior among a diverse sample of 451 black adults residing in Richmond, Virginia. The report defines "help-seeking behavior" as any communication about a problem or troublesome event that is directed toward obtaining support, advice or assistance in times of distress. The use of two types of support--"formal" or professional help, and "informal" (friend and relative) help--are described. The type of help provided by these sources and respondents' satisfaction with help received are also reported. Problem types were divided into five categories--financial, employment, crime, family, and health. The study's interview questionnaire is explained, and results are discussed. It is asserted that black help-seeking behavior has been little studied, even though some research has indicated that blacks are reluctant to seek help. The current study's findings are said to contradict this stereotype. Formal and informal sources of support are held to be critical in the lives of blacks when seeking aid to a problem; the type of support utilized, however, depends upon the nature of the problem encountered. The paper concludes with statistical tables describing the sample and showing results. (KH)

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Help-Seeking Behavior Among a Diverse Sample of Black Men and Women

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Abstract

Help-seeking behavior among a diverse sample of Black adults was investigated. Results of this investigation indicated that informal, as well as formal, sources of support are critical in the lives of Blacks when seeking aid to a problem. The type of support utilized, however, depends upon the nature of the problem encountered. The significance of these findings and implications for future research are discussed.

Help-Seeking Behavior Among a Diverse Sample of Black Men and Women

Help-seeking behavior has been defined as "any communication about a problem or troublesome event that is directed toward obtaining support, advice or assistance in times of distress" (Gourash, 1978). Individuals may seek help from both formal and informal sources of support. Formal sources of support include, for example, assistance received from mental health agencies, physicians, and other forms of professional help. Informal sources of support include assistance received from an individual's own social network of relatives and friends. Researchers and practitioners acknowledge the importance of both professional and informal support systems in helping individuals adjust to troublesome transitions and unexpected crises.

A number of investigators have examined help-seeking behavior (see reviews by Gottlieb, 1976; McKinlay, 1972). Few of these studies, however, document sources of help utilized by Blacks. Exceptions include, for example, research reported by Brunswick (1979), Hendricks, Howard, and Gary (1981), Leashore (1980) and Neighbors (1981). As a result of the limited state of knowledge on help-seeking behavior

among Black adults, a study was undertaken. The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of formal and informal sources of help among a diverse sample of Black men and women. In addition, information was ascertained regarding the type of help provided by these sources and how satisfied the respondents were with this help.

Method

Subjects

The respondents consisted of a random probability-based sample of 451 Black adults residing in Richmond, Virginia. Approximately two thirds (60.8 percent) of the sample were women and the median age was 37.3 years. A descriptive summary of the sample is provided in Table 1.

Instrument

A structured, interview questionnarie, consisting of a number of open and close-ended items, was used in this research. More specifically, respondents were asked had they experienced any financial, employment, crime, family or health-related problems within the past five years. The participants were subsequently asked: 1) who helped them with these problems, 2) what

type of help was provided, and 2) how satisfied were they with the responses of others to their problems.

Procedure

Participants were interviewed with structured, face-to-face interviews during the late summer and fall of 1981. Six hundred and twenty-four residents were selected to participate in this research through a multi-stage, cluster sampling. The overall response rate was 72.3 percent, yielding a sample of 451. A comparison with 1980 census data indicated that the sample was fairly representative of the general Black population in Richmond, Virginia.

Results

Table 2 illustrates the incidence of financial, employment, crime, family and health-related problems reported by the respondents. As indicated, finance- and health-related problems were the areas identified most frequently by the respondents. That is, 44.9 percent of the sample reported finance-related problems and 42.6 percent reported health related problems. The other areas did not appear to be as problematic.

Help-Seeking Behavior

Two specific problem areas, finance- and health-related, were further examined to determine the extent to which formal and informal sources were used when respondents were seeking aid. They were selected for further analysis because they represented the problems most often reported by the respondents.

Table 3 indicates that respondents turned to both formal and informal sources for help with finance and health-related problems. The nature of the problem encountered, however, appeared to influence the type of source that was used. More specifically, 78.5 percent of the sample turned to formal sources of support when seeking aid to a health-related problem, whereas 66.7 percent of the sample turned to informal sources of support when seeking aid to a finance-related problem. Respondents were also more likely not to seek help from anyone when encountered with a finance-related problem (14.1 percent) as compared to a health-related problem (1.1 percent). None of the demographic variables examined in this research were significantly related to the use of formal versus informal sources of help.

Type of Help Provided

In terms of finance-related problems, the largest amount of help received was in the form of loans (35.0 percent) and gifts (27.3 percent); the least amount of help was in the form of instrumental and emotional support (3.9 percent). The type of help received most often by individuals with health-related problems was in the form of instrumental support (47.7 percent).

Satisfaction with Help Provided

As illustrated in Table 4 the majority (86.7 percent) of the sample was either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the responses of others to their problems. Only 13.3 percent of the sample indicated "dissatisfaction" with the help they received from others.

There was a significant relationship between perceived satisfaction with assistance received and educational level, $\underline{X}^2$ (2, $\underline{N}$, = 451) = 7.89, $\underline{p} < .05$. That is, a greater proportion of individuals with some college education (94.9 percent) was satisfied with the responses of others to their problems than individuals who had not graduated from high school (83.5 percent) or those with only a high school education (85.1 percent). None of the other demographic

variables examined in this study were significantly related to perceived satisfaction with the responses of others.

Discussion

Overall, the results of this investigation indicated that the majority of the sample sought assistance to problems encountered in times of distress. Since some research suggests that Blacks are reluctant to seek help, particularly from formal sources of assistance (Cannon & Locke, 1976; Greenley & Mechanic, 1976; Shapiro, 1975; Windle, 1980), these findings are noteworthy.

The respondents in this study used both formal and informal sources of help. The type of problem encountered, however, appeared to determine the type of assistance that was used to a greater extent than various demographic factors. The majority of the respondents sought help from informal networks to a increased degree when faced with a finance-related problem, yet formal networks were used more often as a source of help with health-related problems. Thus, it appears that Blacks do seek formal help when it is appropriate to do so such as when a medical problem arises. Previous research on Blacks also suggests that

the type of problem experienced influences where help is sought (Brown, 1978; Cook & Weiger, 1983; Hendricks et al., 1981; Leutz, 1976; Liberman & Mullen, 1978; Schreiber & Gildwell, 1978).

As expected, the help received from informal sources were primarily socioemotional support and instrumental support in the form of various gifts and loans. Formal sources of assistance were more likely to provide help in the form of instrumental support. Furthermore, an overwhelming proportion of the sample was satisfied with the aid they received from their sources of support, both formal and informal.

In summary, formal and informal sources of support are critical in the lives of Blacks when seeking aid to a problem. Since individuals seek different sources of assistance for different types of problems, this suggests that some type of "selection process" takes place to help individuals decide where they should go to seek assistance. Research should be conducted that examines the dynamics that go into this selection process. In addition, future research should extensively document the appropriateness and effectiveness of using different sources of help under

varying conditions. Such research can have important implications for social and clinical practice.

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Table 1

Descriptive Summary of Sample

Demographic Characteristics	N	Percent*
Sex		
Male	177	39.2
Female	274	60.8
Age		
18-30 years	163	36.4
31-45 years	107	23.9
46-75 years	108	24.1
Over 65	70	15.4
Education		
8 years or less	96	21.4
9-11 years	134	29.8
High School Graduate	113	25.2
Some College	67	14.9
College Graduate	25	5.6
Graduate School	14	3.1
Household Income		
Less than $6,000	100	27.5
$6,000 - $11,999	83	22.9
$12,000 - $24,999	117	32.2
$25,000 - or more	63	17.3
Employment Status		
Not Employed[1]	195	43.5
Employed	253	56.5
Marital Status		
Never Married	149	33.0
Married	162	35.9
Widowed	53	11.8

Table 1 (continued)

Demographic Characteristics	N	Percent*
Divorced/Separated	87	19.3
Family Type		
Nuclear	213	71.7
Extended	84	28.3

*Percentages may not equal 100.0 due to rounding.

[1]Includes unemployed individuals seeking work, homemakers, students, retired individuals and disabled persons.

Table 2
Problems Encountered by Respondents

Problem Areas	% Encountered	N Encountered
Financial	44.8	202
Employment	19.3	87
Crime	10.4	47
Family	19.5	88
Health	41.0	185

Table 3

Help Sought From Formal vs. Informal Supports as a Function of Type of Problem

Source of Help	Financial		Health	
	%	N	%	N
Formal	19.3	37	78.5	143
Informal	66.7	128	20.2	37
No One	14.1	27	1.1	2

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Table 4

Perceived Satisfaction of Respondents With the Responses of Others to Their Problems

Response	N	%
Very Satisfied	72	17.7
Satisfied	281	69.0
Dissatisfied	35	8.6
Very Dissatisfied	19	4.7